



Department  
for Education

# **COVID-19 Contingency Framework:**

**Education and childcare settings**

**May 2021**

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## Summary

The Contingency Framework is a set of guiding principles designed to help decision makers when considering plans to apply, tighten or ease measures affecting education and childcare. The framework includes measures that will be helpful tools in managing local outbreaks and responding to variants of concern (VoCs). It outlines a description of the types of attendance restrictions that may be needed and refers to the government's central decision-making process.

Nurseries, childminders, schools, out of school settings, 16 to 19 academies and further education (FE) and higher education (HE) providers should have an outbreak management plan outlining how they would operate if any of the approaches for easing and tightening of measures, including possible attendance restrictions, become necessary in their local area. This includes how they would ensure every child, pupil or student receives the quantity and quality of education and care to which they are normally entitled, whether onsite or remotely.

Any restrictions on education are always a last resort and should only be initiated following a ministerial decision. This framework is separate to the processes in place for managing outbreaks and operational challenges.

## Who is this publication for?

This guidance is for:

- local authorities
- childcare and education settings

## Early years settings

This includes:

- all providers on the Ofsted early years register
- providers registered with an early years childminder agency
- all pre-reception early years provision in maintained, non-maintained and independent schools

## **Schools (including independent schools) and alternative provision (AP)**

This includes:

- primary schools (including reception classes)
- middle or upper schools
- secondary schools (including school sixth forms)
- residential and day special schools
- special post-16 providers
- AP (including pupil referral units, AP academies and AP free schools)
- 16 to 19 academies

## **Further education providers (FE)**

This includes:

- sixth form colleges
- general FE colleges
- independent training providers
- designated institutions
- adult community learning providers
- special post-16 institutions

## **Higher education providers (HE)**

This includes:

- universities
- specialist and independent HE providers

## **Out-of-school settings**

This includes:

- breakfast clubs

- after-school or holiday clubs
- other out-of-school settings (including providers of wraparound childcare for children over the age of 5)

This guidance should be read alongside the detailed guidance for education and childcare settings and providers operating during coronavirus (COVID-19):

- [actions for early years and childcare providers during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [actions for schools during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [actions for FE Colleges and providers during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [providing apprenticeships during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [protective measures for holiday and after-school clubs, and other out-of-school settings during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [guidance for special schools and other specialist settings: COVID-19](#)
- [guidance for higher education providers: COVID-19](#)
- [COVID-19 guidance for children's social care services](#)

## **Introduction**

The impacts of missing education are severe for children, young people and adults, both now and in the future. The evidence is clear that being out of education causes significant harm to learning, life chances and mental and physical health.

This is especially true for our most vulnerable children and young people. Lower academic achievement also translates into long-term economic costs which affects the standard of living that pupils and students will have over the course of their entire life.

It is also important that parents and carers are able to return to work and having access to childcare and onsite education for their children will allow that to happen.

This guidance has been updated with further information on testing and face covering measures.

## **Easing and tightening of measures in education and childcare**

The government has made it a national priority that education and childcare settings should continue to operate as normally as possible during the COVID-19 pandemic.

If there is extremely high prevalence of COVID-19 and existing measures have failed to reduce community transmission, measures affecting education and childcare may be necessary to reduce the overall number of social contacts in our communities and help protect the NHS.

Measures may also be necessary to help minimise the impact from new variants of the virus.

As a last resort, it may be necessary to restrict attendance at some childcare or education settings. Any decision that attendance should be restricted will not be taken lightly. These will be ministerial decisions made on an area-by-area basis in the light of all available evidence, public health advice and local and national circumstances.

Any measures will be kept under review and should be lifted as soon as the public health and scientific advice says it is appropriate to do so.

The purpose of attendance restrictions in education and childcare is to reduce the number of contacts that all of us have with people in other households. Attendance restrictions of this kind should not be used to address operational challenges, including staff shortages.

The Department for Education (DfE) will work with the Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC), NHS Test and Trace and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), the Chief Medical Officer, Public Health England (PHE), other government departments, as well as relevant local authorities and Directors of Public Health to ensure all decisions about the need for introducing measures or changes to attendance restrictions in education and childcare are informed by the available evidence and the judgement of public health professionals.

NHS Test and Trace has set up Regional Partnership Teams (RPTs) to support local areas in managing outbreaks. These teams are made up of PHE Regional Directors, Contain Regional Convenors and JBC Regional Leads. They provide advice and insights from across the country to the Chief Medical Officer and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to inform decision making.

If individual settings are facing operational challenges in allowing all children, pupils or students to attend, they should work with the local authority (childcare and early years settings), Regional Schools Commissioner (schools) or Education and Skills Funding Agency territorial teams (FE providers) to discuss their individual circumstances and seek support. Sector-specific guidance outlines a number of options for settings to consider if they are facing staff shortages or capacity issues.

Whole setting closure will not generally be necessary. Such closures should only be considered on the advice of local health protection teams or the Regional Director of Public Health.

## Measures affecting education and childcare

Before advising the introduction of attendance restrictions, other measures should be considered. These may include introducing further testing and re-introducing face coverings in education settings.

## Testing

When a variant of COVID-19 is classed as a [variant of concern \(VoC\)](#), DHSC will ramp up targeted testing in that geographical area to help suppress and control any possible new cases and better understand the new variants. Directors of Public Health may also stand-up surge testing in an individual setting or a cluster of settings as part of their responsibilities in outbreak management, particularly in response to VoCs. An increased use of home testing by staff, pupils and students may also be advised in secondary schools and colleges.

## Face coverings

Directors of Public Health may also decide to take additional steps to further reduce risks of transmission in individual educational settings where VoCs have been identified and may advise the temporary re-introduction of face coverings in an individual setting or a cluster of settings where necessary. This may include face coverings in communal areas (for pupils) and/or classrooms (both pupils and staff). In all cases any educational drawbacks in the recommended use of face coverings should be balanced with the benefits in managing transmission and should allow for reasonable exemptions for their use.

## Decision making

Where a need to take action is identified beyond an individual education setting or a cluster of settings, Directors of Public Health should work with their RPT to consider whether to recommend further measures in education settings in that area. This should then be escalated through the national [Local Action Committee command structure](#). This brings together colleagues from NHS Test and Trace and DHSC, the Chief Medical Officer, PHE and other government departments.

The RPT should also consider when it is appropriate to de-escalate any measures which have been escalated and should do so as soon as the evidence supports doing so.

## **Decisions about easing or tightening of attendance restrictions**

If there is significant concern that existing or recently introduced measures in an area have failed to mitigate community transmission, or that a more robust response is required to contain the outbreak of a VoC it may be necessary to limit the number of children and young people in education or childcare settings through attendance restrictions.

No educational setting should move to implement restrictive measures of the kind set out in the contingency framework without the explicit approval of DfE.

Where there is significant concern, and a view that attendance restrictions or other measures (including face coverings or testing) may be necessary, RPTs will meet to discuss the latest data and local intelligence. The same process should be followed where there is evidence that easing of measures could be considered.

If the RPT agrees it is appropriate to consider changes to attendance restrictions in a local area, JBC Regional Leads will escalate the proposal through the government's established Local Action Committee command structure.

The Local Action Committee command structure will review the epidemiological data on a regular rolling basis for any area in which education restrictions are in place, to determine when they should be eased.

The decision that attendance in education or childcare settings should be restricted or have restrictions eased will be made by DfE ministers.

## Contingency framework principles

Depending on the scientific and public health advice, DfE may call for a tightening or easing of measures to education and childcare locally or regionally.

The guiding principle for decision making should be that any restrictions to attendance are kept to a minimum. The maximum possible amount of children and young people should be allowed to attend education and childcare settings, in line with public health advice at the time.

The cohorts described in this framework should be used to guide decisions about restricting attendance as well as prioritising groups to return to face-to-face education and childcare. The government will endeavour to give as much notice as possible of any need for restrictions in education and childcare.

In all circumstances, and in all settings, priority should continue to be given to [vulnerable children and young people](#) and children of critical workers to attend full time.

Any measures will be kept under review and should be lifted as soon as the public health and scientific advice says it is appropriate to do so. The government will try to give as much notice as possible of such changes.

The framework set out in the section below describes the range of attendance restrictions that may be advised across different sectors. The exact nature of the restrictions that should be imposed will depend on the scientific and public health advice. Detailed operational guidance will be published when attendance restrictions are advised.

## Early years settings

The default position for early years settings is to allow all children to attend.

If attendance needs to be limited in early years settings, DfE may advise that only vulnerable children and children of critical workers should be

allowed to attend. DfE will advise when children should be permitted to return.

## Primary schools

The default position for primary schools (including reception classes) is to allow all pupils to attend.

If attendance needs to be limited in primary schools, DfE may advise:

- that primary schools only allow vulnerable children, children of critical workers, children in reception, year 1 and year 2 to attend; or
- that primary schools only allow vulnerable children and children of critical workers to attend

In these circumstances, high-quality [remote education](#) should be provided for all other pupils.

Where it is appropriate to increase attendance, DfE will advise which groups should be prioritised for return.

## Middle schools

Middle schools (with some primary and secondary year groups) may need to adopt a combined approach depending on the restrictions in primary and secondary schools in the local area. High-quality [remote education](#) should be provided for all pupils who are not attending.

## Secondary schools

Where restrictions are required, DfE may advise:

- that secondary schools allow only vulnerable children and young people, children of critical workers, pupils in years 10, 11, 12 and 13, and other pupils who were due to take external exams this academic year to attend; or
- that secondary schools only allow vulnerable children and young people and children of critical workers to attend

High-quality [remote education](#) should be provided for all other pupils.

Where it is appropriate to increase attendance, DfE will advise which groups should be prioritised for return.

## **16 to 19 academies**

16 to 19 academies should follow the guidance for either sixth forms or FE, according to which type of provision their own provision most closely reflects.

## **Further education (FE) providers**

FE provision is varied and already includes a high degree of flexibility to reflect the different age ranges and types of programmes.

Where restrictions are required, the default position for FE providers is to allow only vulnerable students, children of critical workers, students who are taking practical assessments or need access to specialist equipment, and other students who were due to take external exams or assessments this academic year to attend in line with their usual timetable.

Where there is scope to increase attendance beyond the default position, recognising there is low demand for children of critical workers to attend during periods of restriction, FE providers have the flexibility to prioritise attendance of other students within parameters advised by DfE. Such parameters will be related to the ease of deliverability, student engagement with remote education, and maintaining parity with students taking equivalent qualifications in schools or HE.

If attendance needs to be further limited in FE provision, DfE may advise that settings only allow vulnerable students, children of critical workers and those due to take practical assessments (including apprentices) to attend.

These principles also apply to those who are studying higher education courses delivered by FE providers.

Specialist post-16 institutions should continue to welcome and encourage students to attend and follow their usual timetable.

Residential providers should also prioritise attendance for those priority groups as listed above.

In all circumstances, high-quality [remote education](#) should be provided for all students not attending.

## **Apprenticeships**

Apprenticeship delivery and assessment (including the assessment of functional skills qualifications) is extremely flexible. Where restrictions are introduced, these activities should continue to take place in person if online delivery is not possible.

This includes training and assessment in the workplace (unless the workplace is required to close under other COVID-19 measures), in education and assessment settings and in community settings where a venue is being used for training or assessment.

## **Boarding schools**

Where restrictions are introduced, boarding schools should follow the guidance for primary and secondary schools for determining which children should be taught in the classroom. Pupils not in these groups who cannot return home should continue to receive their education in their boarding house.

Boarding schools should also follow the guidance for primary and secondary schools for determining which groups to prioritise for return to the classroom once restrictions are eased.

## **Special schools and special post-16 institutions**

Attendance expectations in special schools will remain in line with the equivalent age groups in mainstream schools, and expectations in special

post-16 institutions will remain in line with the equivalent restrictions in mainstream FE.

However, we recognise that the definition of vulnerable means the cohorts in specialist settings will continue to be eligible for face-to-face provision, where appropriate. Where attendance is mandatory, children and young people should attend as per their usual timetable. Where attendance is not mandatory, special schools should continue to welcome and encourage pupils to attend full-time where the parent or carer wishes for their child to be able to attend. Similarly, special post-16 institutions should continue to welcome and encourage students to attend as per their usual timetable where the young person wishes to attend.

In exceptional circumstances, special schools and special post-16 institutions may encounter circumstances where they cannot provide their usual interventions and provision at adequate staffing ratios, or with staff with vital specialist training. In these circumstances, they should seek to resume as close as possible to the specified provision for the child or young person as soon as possible. Where attendance is mandatory, full-time provision should be provided.

High-quality [remote education](#) should be provided for all pupils and students who are not attending.

## **Alternative provision (AP)**

Alternative provision (AP) should continue to allow all children or pupils to attend full-time.

On occasion AP will encounter circumstances where they cannot provide their usual interventions and provision at adequate staffing ratios, or with staff with appropriate specialist training. In these circumstances they should seek to resume as close as possible to full-time provision, as soon as possible.

High-quality [remote education](#) should be provided for all pupils and students who are not attending.

## Hospital education

Hospital schools should continue to provide full-time education where it is safe and feasible to do so, and in line with hospital infection prevention and control measures.

Mainstream schools should continue to support their pupils in hospital, including through remote education support, to minimise the impact of their hospital stay on their education.

## Out-of-school settings and wraparound childcare

Providers who run community activities, holiday clubs, breakfast or after-school clubs, tuition and other out-of-school or childcare provision (including wraparound childcare), for children over the age of 5 should be able to continue to open for both indoor and outdoor provision.

Where restrictions are required, these providers should only offer face-to-face provision for those children that are eligible to be in school full-time, or who are electively home educated and of equivalent age to those eligible groups.

## Clinically extremely vulnerable pupils and students

There are some pupils and students who are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19. These people have been told directly by their GP or hospital clinician, or have received a letter, confirming that they are '[clinically extremely vulnerable](#)'. Pupils and students who are clinically extremely vulnerable should follow national guidance regarding formal shielding measures in place at the time. See guidance on [who is at higher risk from coronavirus \(clinically extremely vulnerable\)](#) and [protecting people who are clinically extremely vulnerable](#).

Shielding was paused on 1 April and those who are clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) are no longer advised to shield. Updated advice is for the group to continue taking extra precautions to protect themselves, and

to follow the practical steps set out in the CEV guidance page to minimise their risk of exposure to the virus.

## Higher education (HE) providers

HE providers are autonomous and are responsible for putting in place the appropriate measures, in line with guidance, based on the individual circumstances of that provider.

Where restrictions are considered, the default position is that HE providers will remain open, with their facilities and activities reflecting wider restrictions. If further limitations on attendance need to be made, DfE may advise that attendance is prioritised for those courses where it is most beneficial (for example, clinical or practical learning and research).

Where tighter restrictions are required, we may advise that most of the provision should be online, with university facilities open only for essential workers and students who are required to attend because in-person teaching is essential. This should include the continuation of essential research. If it is appropriate to ease any of the restrictions placed on the HE sector, DfE may advise that student cohorts should be prioritised for return in published guidance.

## Infection prevention and control

Schools, nurseries, childminders, FE providers and Ofsted registered providers caring for children over the age of 5, should continue to follow the system of controls guidance (which includes infection prevention and control) outlined in the:

- [actions for schools during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [actions for early years and childcare providers during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [actions for FE colleges and providers during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

- [guidance for special schools and other specialist settings: COVID-19](#)
- [protective measures for holiday and after-school clubs, and other out-of-school settings during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

These controls still apply if restrictions are implemented.

All settings should continually update and review their [risk assessment](#), in consultation with staff and unions, to reflect their contingency model and review implementation of control measures in light of the dynamic situation.

## **Remote education**

Full detail on remote education expectations and the support available to schools, colleges and further education providers is available at [Get Help with Remote Education](#).

DfE is providing [laptops and tablets to schools](#), colleges and FE providers for disadvantaged children and young people to access remote education. Schools and responsible bodies can find out if they have any remaining laptops and tablets available to order in their current allocation by signing into the [Get Help with Technology](#) service.

[Ownership of devices](#) is transferred from DfE to the local authorities, academy trusts, schools and further education providers who receive them at the point of delivery.

Support is also available for disadvantaged children and young people who need an internet connection to [get internet access](#).

The government is funding expert technical support to help schools and colleges set up secure user accounts for Google and Microsoft's education platforms.

Schools and colleges can [apply for government-funded support](#) to get set up on one of two free-to-use digital education platforms, G Suite for Education or Office 365 Education.

## Education workforce

Employers should continue to implement the system of controls set out in our guidance. They should explain to staff the measures they are putting in place to reduce risks to staff, including how these protective measures have been reviewed as part of an updated workplace risk assessment.

Employers should have regard to the guidance on [clinically extremely vulnerable people](#).

Schools and FE providers should also consider if the COVID-19 education contingency framework offers more opportunities for staff to work at home, given reduced numbers of students onsite and the use of remote education for students scheduled to be at home. Employers should have regard to staff work-life balance and wellbeing.

This includes considering how best to balance the demands of onsite teaching and support for remote education, which should be done within the terms and conditions of teachers' and staff employment.

## Safeguarding and designated safeguarding leads

There should be no change to local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, which remain the responsibility of the 3 safeguarding partners:

- local authorities
- clinical commissioning groups
- chief officers of police

If restrictions are implemented in any education or childcare setting, we would expect all local safeguarding partners to be vigilant and responsive to all safeguarding threats and ensure vulnerable children and young persons are safe, particularly as more children and young people will be learning remotely.

[Keeping children safe in education](#) is statutory safeguarding guidance that all schools, FE colleges, sixth form colleges and designated institutions must have regard to. Other 16 to 19 providers are required to comply with relevant safeguarding duties and have regard to the guidance in keeping children safe in education by virtue of their funding agreement.

Early years providers must continue to take all necessary steps to keep children safe and well and have regard to the statutory guidance on [working together to safeguard children](#).

Providers must continue to follow the safeguarding requirements in section three of the [Early Years Foundation Stage \(EYFS\) framework](#) but this should be read alongside the [early years foundation stage: coronavirus disapplications](#) statutory guidance.

Schools and FE providers (ideally led by the designated safeguarding lead (DSL) or a deputy) should review their child protection policy so that it reflects the local restrictions and remains effective. In some cases, a COVID-19 annex or addendum that summarises any key local restriction related changes might be more effective than re-writing and re-issuing the whole policy. It will be important that all staff working in the school or FE provider are aware of the revised policy.

It is expected that schools and FE providers will have a trained DSL (or deputy) available on site. However, it is recognised that for some schools and FE providers there may be operational challenges to this. In such cases, there are two options to consider:

- a trained DSL (or deputy) from the early years setting, school or FE provider can be available to be contacted via phone or online video, for example working from home
- sharing trained DSLs (or deputies) with other schools or FE providers (who should be available to be contacted via phone or online video)

Where a trained DSL (or deputy) is not on site, in addition to one of the above options, a senior leader should take responsibility for co-ordinating safeguarding on site.

## Transport

Transport services to education settings should continue to be provided as normal where children are attending education settings. The [transport to school and other places of education: 2020 to 2021 academic year](#) guidance remains in place.

## School and FE meals

Schools should provide meal options for all pupils who are in school. Meals should be available free of charge to all infant pupils and pupils who meet the benefits-related free school meals eligibility criteria.

Schools should also continue to provide free school meals support for pupils who are eligible for benefits related free school meals and who are not attending school because they:

- are self-isolating
- have had symptoms or a positive test result themselves
- are a close contact of someone who has COVID-19

Schools should work with suppliers to prepare meals or lunch parcels to be collected by, or delivered to, these eligible children during their time at home. Any parcels should be distributed in line with any local restrictions and should meet the school food standards.

The guidance on [providing school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) outlines how and when children eligible for free school meals should be supported at home. It also contains information regarding best practice arrangements where food parcels are needed.

FE providers should continue to support students who are eligible for, and usually receive, free meals. This includes students in further education, who are newly eligible. FE providers should provide support even if students are studying remotely due to COVID-19.

There's further [guidance on free meals in further education-funded institutions](#).



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